

**Testimony To Be Given Before Michigan State Legislative Educational Committee  
By Nancy Damoose, Ann Arbor, MI  
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Good morning. My name is Nancy Damoose. For the past nine years my children have attended the Saline Area Schools. According to some reports, our High School is currently ranked #1 in Washtenaw County, and the #3 High School in the State of Michigan. As a member of Students First, I have come today in support of Michigan's public school students, and in support of educational reform in the state of Michigan, especially as it pertains to the issue of "First In Last Out."

I am a 64-year-old mother of four, ages 16 to 39. Actually, my husband and I are parents of not one, but two generations of children. After our older two left home for college in the early 1990s, we started over and adopted a baby boy in 1992. He graduated from Saline High School last year and is now a student at Calvin College.

In 1995, we adopted our youngest, our daughter who will be a junior in high school this fall. I am also the grandmother of five, the oldest of whom will be entering Saline High School in September. As you might assume, we feel we have a great deal invested in Michigan's public schools – past, present, *and* future.

I have come to you today to share some of our experiences, in the hope that they will shed light on the legislation you are now considering.

During the past 35 years, my husband and I have partnered with literally hundreds of teachers in the course of our children's educations. Many of those experiences have been extremely positive, and extremely rewarding. Many, however, have not.

Over the course of decades of involvement in the public school system, we have always sought to honor those teachers who have honored their profession and their students. By the same token, we have been diligent in attempting to affect change where we believe change is needed. It is in that spirit that I appear before you now.

I believe that the primary cause of those unsatisfactory experiences has been the "First In Last Out" policy we are addressing here today.

We do not advocate the elimination of teachers based on either age *or* length of service, for we have experienced good teachers at both ends of the spectrum – young and old, experienced and not-so-experienced. Rather, we advocate retention of teachers based on their accountability to the system, and their ongoing performance and contribution to the education of those they have been called to teach. I would like to share with you a few examples that, I believe, make my point and support our position.

Let me start by telling you about Miss Angot, who taught English Composition at Birmingham Seaholm High School during the 1980s and 90s. Miss Angot was nearing retirement by the time we met her. She was financially secure and did not need to teach. Except for one thing: she loved her students, and wanted them to become not just good, but great writers. She did not care if her students loved her in return; she only cared that they learned – and loved – to write.

Today, my two grown children are both accomplished writers. My son became a published author at the age of 26; today he writes and produces television documentaries. My daughter is now a high school teacher who desires for her students to learn as she learned under the guidance of Ms. Angot.

Then there is Mr. Erby, a brilliant young man who taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra to my younger son. When I first met Mr. Erby, I rolled my eyes and thought to myself, “What could he possibly have to teach my son? He’s just a kid himself!”

But then I listened to what Mr. Erby had to say when he addressed the parents for the first time that year. He told us, “I am not here to teach your children Algebra!” For a very brief moment, this seemed to confirm my initial impression. But then he continued: “I am here to teach your children how to gather information, evaluate that information, and make decisions based on their evaluations.”

Today, I would fight for both Mr. Erby’s and Ms. Angot’s survival in the public school system. Both have demonstrated complete devotion to their students; both contributed greatly to my children’s educations, and to all of the public school students who have been fortunate enough to study under their tutelage.

But sadly, there are teachers in the system who are not so committed to their students; who are simply “waiting it out” until they can walk out of the classroom for the last time. Teachers who have lost interest in teaching and should have retired years ago – or should have been let go.

During his sophomore year in high school, my son chose to take a class in computer-aided design, or CAD. He is extremely conscientious, and as a result he labored over his designs, and quickly fell behind on his assignments. He was frustrated by this, so after three weeks, I called the senior teacher to explain the situation and see what we could do to help him succeed. His response was, “Mrs. Damoose, if you are looking for your son to get to an ‘A’ in this class, well, I’m afraid that’s just not going to happen.” I assured him that we were not “looking for an A.” What we were looking for was a positive learning experience, and if my son got any less than a “C,” then together he and I had failed him! His advice to me was simply to tell my son to “Work harder!”

Sadly, this has become a frequent refrain among some of the senior teachers who are no longer interested in “thinking outside the box” to help a struggling student.

There are dozens of accounts I could share with you, but I will spend my last few moments here by sharing with one that is ongoing.

My daughter’s current English teacher is a man who has taught for decades, has long-since lost interest in educating the students, and should have been retired years ago previous one.

This spring my daughter’s class read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which for our family is a real jewel. My daughter, who is a very hard worker, got a D+ on the exam over the book. Upon reviewing her grades, I immediately e-mailed the teacher to find out where she – and we – had gone wrong; in spite of two e-mails on the subject, I did not hear from the teacher for 12 days! This is not the first time this particular teacher has felt he was above responding to us as parents.

However, this time I wrote again to request an appointment to meet with him personally in order for us to review the exam together. I believe this is school policy regarding exams. But that very day he sent the exam home with our daughter, explaining that this would be much easier than our trying to meet together. I would ask, “Easier for whom?”

The exam was multiple-choice. One of those questions asked about how long the jury had deliberated in the book. My daughter missed that one, and several others like it.

As a family, we have spent hours discussing the book with her – the plot, the characters, etc. But sadly she now sees herself as a failure because she didn't remember minor details in the book – details which, by the way, were not discussed in class prior to the exam!

But it wasn't just my daughter's problem. This is a class of 17 students. It has been reported to me that of those 17, 10 failed the test, and the other 7 got in the D range. To me, this does not translate as "Failure to Learn;" rather, it translates as a "Failure to Teach."

I can't tell you how many movies the class has watched this year – too many to count. But I can tell you that four times in the last three weeks this teacher has announced to his class that for one reason or another, "We're not going to do anything today. We're just going to sit here quietly." One day he had papers to grade; another, he had a family emergency to deal with; and yet another, he was angry with the class for their lackadaisical attitude. To me, this translates as, "Failure to Prepare" on the part of the teacher. Or even worse, "Failure to Care."

Last week, with five weeks remaining in the term, this teacher announced to the class that he had decided they would *not* be reading *Catcher in the Rye* this year. In his opinion, the book was about a bunch of "whiny teenage boys." Since he knew the students did not want to do the work, so they would do something *easier* until the end of the term. Again I would ask, "Easier for whom?"

Like most other districts in Michigan, Saline has been forced to make major teacher cutbacks in the last two years. Because this man was "**First In**," he has been allowed to keep his job for far too long. As a result, my daughter and her classmates have lost out on at least two American classics – and who knows what else. I am certain that this would not have been so, had her teacher been a newer, more enthusiastic recruit. Sadly, many of *those* teachers have become victims of bad policy.

I am happy to report that Mr. Erby did not lose his job in the "First In Last Out" shuffle. But he is no longer teaching middle school Algebra. That position was given to someone with more seniority. Mr. Erby is now teaching 4<sup>th</sup> grade!

Simply put, "First In Last Out" is a policy that makes no sense and is **failing** our children! In many ways, it has **already** failed my own children and grandchildren.

There are still many wonderful teachers out there like Mr. Erby and Ms. Angot who want nothing more than to teach our children to read - to write - to think - and to learn. Some are experienced, some are not; but they are all committed to our children and excited about the opportunity to shape young minds.

On their behalf, and on behalf of my children and grandchildren, I strongly encourage you to pass legislation that does away with the policy of "First In Last Out." Then let the community decide on an evaluation system that is fair, productive, performance-based, accountable, and promotes a better education for all of our children.

Thank you for your time, and for your sincere interest in the public school children of the State of Michigan.